

Just Say No—to Tea! The Edenton Tea Party

Boston was not the only city to host a “tea party” to protest the Tea Act of 1773. Edenton, North Carolina, had a protest as well. But there was a difference between Boston’s and Edenton’s tea parties. Instead of a group of male colonists dressed as Indians dumping tea into the sea, a group of well-to-do female colonists gathered together and pledged to stop drinking tea. Refusing tea might not seem like much of a sacrifice, but during the 1700s tea was a popular beverage. Giving up tea in those days would be like giving up soft drinks today!



1774 Tea Caddy used in the house where the Edenton Tea Party was held according to 1914 guide by Fred Olds. Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History.

The problem started when the British government decided to help the East India Company, which sold tea. Many of England’s most important people—including the king—held stock in the company. The East India Company was losing money, so the British government passed the Tea Act. Under this act, the East India Company was the only company allowed to sell tea in America.

The American colonists thought the Tea Act was unfair. To make a dramatic stand against it, some men in Boston boarded three ships carrying East India tea that were docked in the harbor and threw the hated tea into the water.

Mrs. Penelope Barker, a wealthy resident of Edenton, was inspired by the Boston Tea Party. She decided that the women of North Carolina should make a stand against the Tea Act too. But protesting was a risky move because her husband, Thomas Barker, worked for the Crown as a colonial agent. However, the events in Boston stirred her soul.

Penelope Barker reportedly went door to door in Edenton, asking her neighbors and friends to join her in boycotting tea from the East India Company. In October of 1774, she and fifty other women gathered in the home of Mrs. Elizabeth King, the wife of a local merchant. As they sipped tea brewed from mulberry leaves, the participants made a solemn pledge against

Mrs. Penelope Barker, a wealthy resident of Edenton, was inspired



1780-84 Chinese tea caddy. Originally belonged to family of Mary Bonner & daughter, Lydia, both signers of the Edenton Resolves (Edenton tea party), Oct. 25, 1774. . Courtesy of North Carolina Museum of History.

buying or drinking British tea. They even burned any East India tea that they still had.

Barker and her group did this to show the world that they thought the British government was being unfair to American colonists. They also put their thoughts to paper and wrote a letter that was published by a London newspaper. In the letter, they stated that they couldn't ignore issues that were important to the peace and happiness of their country. The Edenton Tea Party is considered by historians to be the first time a group of women in America came together to mount a political protest.

Back in England, people laughed at the Edenton women, and the newspapers made fun of them. Some people thought they weren't acting "ladylike" by talking about politics. During the 1700s it was considered disgraceful for females to become involved in political affairs. The British newspapers ran cartoons hinting that the women had bad morals. However, in the colonies they were cheered as patriots who were willing to make a strong stand.

If you visit Edenton today, you won't find Mrs. Elizabeth King's house, where the famous tea party took place. However, you will see a colonial teapot sitting on a Revolutionary War cannon in the spot where the house used to stand. The teapot celebrates those fifty-one strong-willed colonists who believed in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.



1893 Painting - Edenton Tea Party
A much altered oil painting "copy" of the Philip Dawes
1775 London Mezzotint "A Society of Patriotic Ladies at
Edenton in North Carolina." Courtesy of North Carolina
Museum of History.